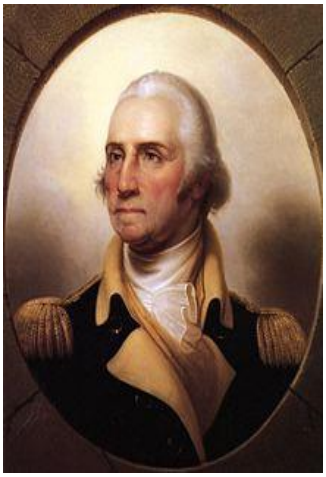
BATTLEFIELD LEADERSHIP
CHARACTER · COURAGE · COMPETENCE

The First Battle of Trenton
Case Study

General George Washington



Badly beaten and driven from the important port city of New York in the late summer of 1776, Washington's bloodied and weary army was in full retreat. The pursuing army of British and Hessian soldiers was led by the talented and aggressive General Charles Cornwallis, with General William Howe supervising the overall command. Washington's main goal was to keep his ever-shrinking force intact. On 1 December, enlistments for New Jersey and Maryland militia troops expired, and with it more than 2,000 men disappeared into the woods and swamps of New Jersey, leaving Washington with a meager force of only 3,800 men. Daily deserters, sickness, and disease continued to decimate Washington's effective fighting force. A British observer boasted that the American army "is broken all to pieces, and the spirit of their leaders... is also broken." He concluded, "It is well nigh over with them."

After nearly 100 miles of retreat, Washington finally reached the central New Jersey town of Trenton in early December. The small town of about 100 buildings, located on the Delaware River, provided Washington with a chance to separate his army from his pursuers. Washington ordered all boats along the river to be commandeered. He then supervised a five-day, agonizingly laborious crossing of his men, artillery, wagons, horses and supplies into Pennsylvania. On 8 December, Generals Howe and Cornwallis arrived in Trenton with the vanguard of their 12,000 troops and began firing across the river at the Americans.

Believing the American army could not strike against his superior forces, General Howe, in true European fashion, suspended operations for the winter and returned to the elegant trappings of New York. To check the Americans across the river, he established a garrison at Trenton comprised of three Hessian regiments under the command of Colonel Johann Rall.

Across the river, Washington began to assess his options. His fighting force had been reduced to a total of about 4,000 soldiers, including about 1,400 militia. Of these troops, many were near starvation, without adequate clothing, and demoralized. And while some units had shown flashes of bravery and discipline in New York, it was apparent they were no equal to the professionally-trained British and Hessian soldiers. Washington also knew that enlistments would expire for several hundred of the men on 1 January. If Washington hoped to strike his enemy, he would need to do so soon.

On 15 December, Washington personally reconnoitered Trenton from across the river. He wanted to see for himself what kind of fortifications the Hessians were making in the town. He also wanted to confirm intelligence he had been receiving. Although still early in the war, Washington had already come to rely on a network of spies and deception. From one spy, John Honeyman, the general was able to learn the precise dispositions of the Hessians. The Hessians had taken up weakly-manned positions in and around the outskirts of the town, and had made no fortifications nor placed any artillery at the town's perimeter. Honeyman, who had disguised himself as a local cattleman, had also managed to be captured and released by Colonel Rall. During his interrogation, he was able to paint a picture of destitution among the Americans encamped across the Delaware. Truthful to be sure, but it served to further convince Rall that an attack by the Americans could not be in the making, let alone effective.

Washington needed to make a decision. For the first time in months, he might have the element of surprise and initiative on his side. He would also have numerical superiority, along with greater firepower in the form of several more cannon than the Hessians. But a surprise attack would require speed, timing and execution – skills his army had not displayed in defeat after defeat for the past four months. Many of his key officers who would be relied on were still young, including artillery Captain Alexander Hamilton and 18-year-old Lieutenant James Monroe. Additionally, thousands of men, scores of horses and several pieces of heavy artillery would have to cross the river in one night, a heroic feat even if the dead-of-winter weather cooperated. The high possibility of a snow storm would certainly delay his army's river crossing and its nine-mile march to Trenton, greatly reducing the chance of surprise. Snow would also render his men's muskets ineffective. Ice could choke the river, making the crossing to and from Trenton impossible, or treacherous at best. Local Loyalists or British spies could easily tip the Hessians off to Washington's plan. Finally, unlike most of their previous battles, the Americans would be required to attack, not defend. Untested in this mode, they would need to defeat the best-trained troops in North America.

Washington's other option was to remove his army farther inland away from the enemy to regroup and resupply. Provided the British did not cross the Delaware themselves and attack, a few months of fresh provisions might restore morale and create a slightly stronger fighting force for the spring.

Both options had dire consequences. The British were now only a few days march from the capital of Philadelphia. They would certainly be resupplied by the spring and in an even greater mood to conclude the war. Calls for Washington's removal as commander-in-chief would become louder throughout all the colonies.

If Washington could pull it off, a victory might yet reinvigorate his army and revive the waning American spirit of independence. Washington himself had written that a master blow to the enemy could prove "fatal to them, and would most certainly raise the Spirits of the People, which are quite sunk by our late misfortunes."

As he pondered his choices, the enlistment expiration day of 1 January was now only days away. At his headquarters near the Delaware, Washington thought back to the sweltering hot days in New York when on 9 July, a mere four months ago, he ordered the Declaration of Independence read aloud to all of his troops. This new nation, and the ideals it stood for, were now as fragile as the document upon which that declaration was written. Seeking inspiration, he pulled a freshly-printed leaflet from his wool coat and read the first few words, "These are the times that try men's souls." Washington was about to make his decision.

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THOUGHTS FOR REVISION:

- Perhaps aided by the fact that the situation is a simpler one, this subject provides for a clearer presentation of the facts of the case (compared to the Bragg document).
- Along those same lines, this document lacks much of the left flank/right flank, staggered attack strategy, etc. that muddies the waters a little bit in the Bragg document. If I'm a corporate Joe working with only vague recollections of high school history, this matters.
- On the other hand, perhaps the Chickamauga scenario is a better representation of the political and hierarchical goat rodeo that hamstrung the CSA the same way it cripples corporations.
- There is a story about Rall receiving a note alerting him to the imminent attack, which he stuck in his pocket without bothering to read. Even though this lesson focuses on the decision-making and leadership challenges facing Washington, I submit that the Rall story as a leadership object lesson seems too juicy to pass up.
- "(Corporate America), like Hell, is not easily conquered. Yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict, the more glorious the triumph." (Thomas Paine)